

The events leading up to that moment seemed like smoke on a gentle breeze in the back of Adam's head. They blurred and lazily drifted away while his mind tried to comprehend what he saw in front of him.

His grandfather, Edward McTaggart Senior, stood in the open doorway with his hand on his gun, staring at Adam through squinted eyes.

The fact that Ed Sr. was alive was enough of a shock to Adam's already overworked brain, but the sight of him was sufficient to create confusion. Adam had been told that Ed Sr. was old when Ed Jr. was born, so Adam had always pictured Ed Sr. as a withered old man.

The Ed Sr. standing in the doorway was far from that. The faded white tank top Ed Sr. wore didn't hide his toned muscles, and while he wasn't huge, he was in excellent shape. He would have been in excellent shape for a 30 year old – but he had to be what? *Nearly 80*, Adam guessed.

All of these thoughts occurred to Adam in fractions of a second, even though it seemed much longer. He almost forgot where he was and what he was doing until Augustus spoke again, shaking him out of his mental stupor.

“Senior, this is your Grandson, Adam,” said Augustus.

Ed Sr.'s eyes squinted even tighter as he observed Adam.

Adam wondered if Ed Sr. could actually see through those narrow slits.

One of Ed's eyebrows raised and the eye underneath opened slightly. “Looks like his mother,” he said.

“Really?” replied Augustus, “I think he looks more like his dad.”

Ed shrugged. He slowly lowered the gun and turned back into the building.

“You better get out of the heat,” said Ed Sr. as he turned.

“We need to go back in about 30 minutes,” said Augustus, “so we’ll have to make it quick. I assume you know what happened already.”

“Yep,” was the short reply.

Augustus waved for Adam to follow as he walked toward Ed Sr.

“Any ideas where they went?” asked Augustus.

“Nothing concrete,” replied Ed Sr.

The short conversation ended as they stepped inside, and as soon as Adam crossed the entry way, cool air surrounded him. He hadn’t realized just how hot and humid it was outside until that moment.

The next thing that surprised him was the interior of the building. It didn’t look like a tropical cabana at all, but more like a military command center. They stopped at a central table that was displaying a map of the world on its digital countertop.

So many questions ran through Adam’s mind but he was tongue-tied and couldn’t get the words out. Thankfully Augustus helped him get started.

“I’m guessing you have a lot of questions, like, how is your grandpa alive, where are we, what is this place - right?”

Adam nodded.

“Can you speak or did you hit your head?” asked Ed Sr.

Adam couldn’t tell if he was trying to make a joke or not.

“Sorry, it’s just so...overwhelming.”

The other two looked at each other and just nodded slightly.

Augustus made a motion to Ed Sr. indicating that he should answer the questions.

“Well, first off, you want to know how I’m still alive. That one’s easy. I faked my death.”

Ed Sr. paused and stared at Adam for a few seconds.

Adam wasn’t sure why Ed Sr. was doing that, but he was starting to understand why Ed Jr. and his father didn’t get along.

“I figured that part out already,” said Adam. “Why did you do it?”

Ed Sr. almost cracked a smile, as if he approved of the response.

“Multiple reasons. Mainly, I did it so we could start this organization.”

Again, he paused.

“And this organization is?” asked Adam, getting frustrated at the way Ed Sr. was answering.

“We just call it The Branch because it branched off from the Sentinel League. Myself and Aug’s father started it a long time ago. He ran it until he died, and then I took over. That’s how I faked my death. It was actually Aug’s father who died, not me. He had been sick so I moved overseas to get everything in order.”

Again he paused until Adam nodded.

“I thought you got re-married?” asked Adam.

Ed Sr. chuckled and shook his head. “That was the story, but I didn’t really. There were reasons for the deception, but we don’t have time for that right now. Right now we need to give you the basics. The Branch started when Aug’s father, Julius, and I were upset with the League over their decisions. They’re always on the defensive, waiting for

the Decreta to make a move and hoping their network of loyal followers would be able to warn them ahead of any attacks. *We* don't agree with that. *We* think the League should be chasing them down and imprisoning them. They almost did it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but because a few people died in the attempt they went back to their old ways. I have always believed we needed to hunt them down, but as a young man with a wife and kid at home I didn't want to put them in danger. Once your grandma died and your dad left to join the League, I started pushing for an offensive position. Almost had George convinced too, but your Dad put a stop to that. Julius had already been doing the same thing in Europe, and that's how we got to know each other. Anyway, by that time I was already too old to do much fighting myself, and so was Julius. Once we both decided to retire we decided to do something, so with a little help we formed the Branch. Since then, we've been using data from the League to hopefully try and capture some of the Decreta. Came close a few times too."

"How many of you are there?" asked Adam.

"32 at the moment," replied Augustus.

"Anyone I know?"

Augustus and Ed Sr. exchanged looks before nodding.

"Who? Anyone from Grayson."

Ed Sr. shook his head. "You've gotta be pretty loyal to the League if you live in Grayson."

Adam thought about it for a moment. "Then it has to be someone at Area 51, since I don't know anyone else."

"There's hope for you yet, maybe. You figured that out all by yourself," said Ed Sr.

Again, Adam couldn't tell if he was kidding or serious.

"Besides Aug here, most of the security team at Area 51

is with us. A couple of teachers too.”

“I’d bet Val is one. Who else?” asked Adam.

Ed Sr. nodded.

“You’ll find out in time,” said Augustus, “but we’ve got to go soon.”

“So why did you bring me here? Can you find Kevin or are you just trying to recruit me as bait?”

“A little of both, to be honest. Since they’ve made the move to take Kevin as incentive for you to find the Heartstone, we want to make sure we can find you if something should happen.”

“Did you move the Heartstone?” Adam asked Ed Sr. It was a thought that had been stirring at the back of his head from soon after he had realized Ed Sr. was alive.

Ed Sr. shook his head once. “That was your Dad, from what I can tell. Where he put it, I have no idea.”

“So you can’t help me find it?”

“Not at the moment,” he replied.

Augustus took over. “Because Larix thinks you can find the Heartstone for him, we know he’ll contact you. We’re hoping you’ll help us by telling us as soon as he does. It may help us figure out where he is and where Kevin is. In return, we’ll offer you any help you need to find the Heartstone.”

Adam thought about it for a second. “Okay, but how am I supposed to contact you?”

“You learn about the League communication system yet?”

Adam shook his head.

“We don’t have time to show you now, but you will. Augustus will make sure you’ll be able to contact me here once you do. I never leave.”

“Where is ‘here’?” asked Adam.

“It’s a small island in the south pacific ocean. I picked it because it gets so much sunlight that the Radome is always charged. Peter and Bernice in the RTS hub make sure I get food and supplies on a regular basis. I am able to monitor many things from here, but I can tell you more about that some other time. Right now we need to know if you are going to help us or not.” He stared at Adam as if he were reading his mind.

“Yes, I’ll help,” said Adam, not totally convinced that he would.

Ed had a small grin. “Good. Augustus will be your main contact for everything except contact by the Decreta. For that, you contact me here directly, got it?”

Adam nodded.

“Good. Now it’s time to go,” he said as he looked at his watch.

Augustus led the way back to the door.

Adam didn’t know if he should shake Ed Sr.’s hand, give him a hug, or say nothing at all to him. The way Ed Sr. had acted so far gave no indication that the two of them were related, much less the fact that Adam was Ed’s only grandchild.

At the door, Augustus turned to look at Ed, then cleared his throat. Adam followed his gaze.

Ed had followed them to the door, but as soon as Adam looked back he stopped.

“Sorry this had to be so fast and abrupt, Adam. I know we don’t have much time. It’s nice to finally meet you,” he stuck out his hand and Adam shook it, noticing Ed’s firm and powerful grip. “I hope in the future we can get to know each other better,” Ed continued. It almost sounded as if that part

were rehearsed.

“Uh...me too,” replied Adam, releasing his grip.

“I’ll contact you later with an update,” said Augustus, and he opened the door to step outside.

As they walked back the way they had come in the beginning, Adam was lost in thought. So much had happened in the past 24 hours that none of it seemed real, but more like a strange dream.

“He’s really a great guy – just comes across really rough,” said Augustus.

Adam snapped out of his thoughts.

“Could’ve fooled me,” said Adam in reply.

Augustus chuckled as he continued walking beside Adam. “Of course, you can’t tell anyone about this.”

“What about Jimmy and Mark?”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t,” said Augustus.

“Why not?”

“I’m not worried about Jimmy, but Mark is Gurpreet’s son, for one.”

“There’s no way Mark would tell his dad about this,” said Adam. “And he’ll be the first one saying we need to track them down. He may be annoying, but he’s usually been able to influence his dad. He may be the only one that could convince Gurpreet that we need to track down the Decreta and capture them.”

Augustus thought about it for a moment as they neared the Radome. “You really think they can keep this quiet? I know that the League thinks so, based on their results from training.”

Adam nodded. “They’ve been part of this from the beginning. I don’t think I can do it without them. Plus, just

the fact that Mark would be part of a secret organization within a secret organization would be enough to keep him quiet, even if he might get a little smug about it.”

“From what I read about him, you’re probably right,” replied Augustus. “Okay, you can tell them.”

Augustus stopped at the base of the Radome.

“When we get back, they’re probably still going to be deciding what to do. If I know them well enough, they are going to want to attack this from two angles. They’ll want you to keep searching for the Heartstone, but even if you find it, they won’t give it to Larix.”

Adam took a moment for that to sink in.

“But then Larix will kill Kevin.”

Augustus nodded.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Augustus shook his head. “Kevin made the oath to the League at the beginning of last year, remember – to give his life in service to the League. This is a prime example of that exact situation. In their opinion, his life will save countless others.”

Adam’s heart sunk at the realization that Augustus was right.